

# Narco-narratives and Transnational Form: The Geopolitics of Citation in the Circum-Caribbean

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Abstract: This essay argues that narco-narratives--in film, television, literature, and music--depend on structures of narrative doubles to map the racialized and spatialized construction of illegality and distribution of death in the circum-Caribbean narco-economy. Narco-narratives stage their own haunting by other geographies, other social classes, other media; these hauntings refract the asymmetries of geo-political and socio-cultural power undergirding both the transnational drug trade and its artistic representation. The circum-Caribbean cartography offers both a corrective to nation- or language-based approaches to narco-culture, as well as a vantage point on the recursive practices of citation that are constitutive of transnational narco-narrative production.

A transnational field of narrative production responding to the violence of the transnational drug trade has emerged that encompasses music and film, television and journalism, pulp and literary fiction. Cutting across nations, languages, genres, and media, a dizzying narrative traffic in plotlines, character-types, images, rhythms, soundtracks, expressions, and gestures travels global media channels through appropriations, repetitions, allusions, shoutouts, ripoffs, and homages. While narco-cultural production extends around the world, this essay focuses on the transnational frame of the circum-Caribbean as a zone of particularly dense, if not foundational, narrative traffic. The circum-Caribbean cartography offers

both a corrective to nation- or language-based approaches to narco-culture, as well as a vantage point on incredibly recursive practices of citation that are constitutive of the whole array of narco-narrative production: textual, visual, and sonic.

Erich Auerbach, confronting the similarly expansive flows and exchanges of “world literature,” called for an *Ansatzpunkt*, “a point of departure, a handle, as it were, by which a subject can be seized. The point of departure must be the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy” (14-15). The “set of phenomena” this essay “elects” are patterns of narrative doubles in a series of citational texts set within the context of circum-Caribbean drug violence “whose interpretation is a radiation out from them.” These works—a US detective show, a Colombian *telenovela*, a Jamaican dancehall track, a US coming-of-age novel, and a Jamaican film—depend on mutually articulating intratextual and intertextual structures that map the racialized and spatialized construction of illegality and the distribution of death in the late twentieth-century circum-Caribbean narco-economy. Dialectically negotiating the truth-claims of official discourse and the genre conventions of fiction, narrative doublings mediate the tension--and stage the aporia--between hegemonic scripts of drug violence and the efforts of individual narratives to localize and complicate those scripts even as they inescapably participate in them.

As an *Ansatzpunkt*, narrative doubling “radiates out” to a variety of ways in which narco-narratives stage their own haunting by other geographies, other social classes, and other media. These hauntings refract the asymmetries of geopolitical and sociocultural power undergirding both the transnational drug trade and its artistic representation. The particular history of the circum-Caribbean, with its unique “proximity and vulnerability to imperial and neoimperial

forces” (Stites Mor 279), makes these asymmetries not only legible to scholars and critics, but also part of the formal apparatus of narco-narratives themselves, which constantly reference their own emanation out of a historically specific circum-Caribbean “socio-economic formation” (Lemelle 58). Much scholarly attention has been paid to narco-narratives as regionally specific, northern Mexican border narratives (Cf. Matousek 119-120); however, while the US-Mexico border looms large in the hemispheric narco-economy, this essay makes plain that narco-narratives rarely limit themselves to one border. The circum-Caribbean designation encourages us to pursue less linear, more plural and rhizomatic vectors of traffic, in a nod to the work of Édouard Glissant, who perhaps more than anyone brought the circum-Caribbean cartographic frame, reaching from Brazil to New Orleans, out of the disciplines of botany and Meso-American anthropology (Glissant 120-143). These vectors of traffic cut across disciplines and media, inspiring landmark works including Kamau Brathwaite’s “Jazz and the West Indian Novel” (1967-1969), where T. S. Eliot and Duke Ellington help clarify “the West Indian contribution to the general movement of New World creative protest” (337); Ned Sublette’s *The World that Made New Orleans* (2008), where you can track the maritime routes by which Cuba’s cha-cha-chá and three-chord loops shaped Fats Domino’s R & B and Chuck Berry’s rock ‘n’ roll; and, more recently, Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), a novelistic versioning of Laurie Gunst’s *Born fi’ Dead*, with a proliferation of Cuban political operatives, CIA agents, Colombian dealers, Bahamian crackheads, American journalists, reggae singers, and gunmen in Cold War Downtown Kingston, Miami, and New York. In light of such circum-Caribbean cultural production, it would seem impossible to produce a singular, border-bound narco-narrative. Whether from the hegemonic media position of US network television, or from the studio yards of Downtown Kingston, every narco-narrative integrates its doubles, its

shadows. This is the formal expression of the transnationalism of the drug trade, and the transnationalism of the field of its narrative production. In the case of productions emanating out of the US media, these shadows express the bad conscience of narco-narrative production, politically ambivalent not only about the racialized, spatialized victims of the war on drugs, but also about its own dependence on the saleability of those victims and their art forms. In the case of productions emanating out of Colombia and Jamaica, these shadows set forth a critical understanding of local violence as essentially structured by US demand for narcotics and its government's militarized, exported war on drugs. On the other hand, formally and generically these narco-narratives betray their own sort of ambivalence, an ambivalence about their own aesthetic and commercial accommodation to the violent social relations produced by these transnational structures.

In two episodes about gangster rap and the *narcocorrido*, respectively, the US television procedural *Law & Order* leverages the repetitive capacities of its own formulaic structure in order to make available a critique of the racial substitutions encouraged by the hegemonic imagination of drug violence. These two *Law & Order* episodes that appeared less than five years apart essentially follow the same plot, featuring drug murders, racialized minorities, and the violent popular music associated with them. However, the doubled, conflated representation of African Americans and hip-hop with that of transnational Mexican migrants and *narcocorridos* points to a disturbing fungibility of racial signifiers in the transnational field of narco-narrative production, making available a critique of this fungibility even as the show relies upon it. Episode 7 of Season 20, "Boy Gone Astray," aired on November 6, 2009, three years into Mexico's military-led war against the drug cartels. The show opens with the discovery of the corpse of a young blonde woman, ostensibly an interior designer. The investigation locates a

second apartment of the victim, filled with valuable modern art, cash, and high-grade marijuana; detectives conclude that she fronted for a Mexican drug cartel, dealing and laundering money through the art market. Clues to her murder emerge through a *narcocorrido* mp3 that Assistant District Attorney Connie Rubirosa (Alana de la Garza), despite being a native speaker of Spanish, takes to her DJ ex-boyfriend to help decode. He identifies the performers as Los Guerreros, a *norteño* band commissioned to glorify the exploits of the Vela family drug cartel.

Through the dual figure of the native informant, *Law & Order* complicates its portrayal of Mexican narco-culture. ADA Rubirosa offers some historical context for District Attorney Jack McCoy's (Sam Waterston) dismissal of *narcocorridos* as merely glamorizing violence and drug trafficking. She explains how *narcotraficantes* inhabit a symbolic space partly shaped by traditional *corridos*, or border ballads:

CONNIE RUBIROSA. These guys are folk heroes.

JACK MCCOY. Not to mention pushers and murderers.

CONNIE RUBIROSA. Well, you'd have to know Mexico's colonial history. Banditos fought the power. Banditos like my ancestor, Juan Cortina. People revered them.

JACK MCCOY. Your ancestor, maybe I should keep a closer eye on you. So the Vela cartel targeted Nina Wilshire because she was in a song that extolled the virtues of a rival cartel.

KEVIN BERNARD. Yeah, well, it's called talking smack with a semi-automatic.

Rubirosa invokes her own ethnic filiation with a tradition of *norteño* resistance to both *gringos* and the Mexican central government. Revealing the constitutive doubleness of the native informant indexed as well by McCoy's crack about keeping a closer eye on her, Rubirosa historicizes the *narcocorrido* genre only then to deploy her ethnicity manipulatively to compel

the boy-assassin Raphael, trained by the Vela family, to testify against them. She uses memories of comforting bowls of her mother's *birria* to entice his testimony, which the death of another witness-suspect indicates is a near-certain death wish. When during the trial a *narcocorrido* circulates on the Internet threatening ADA Rubirosa, *Law & Order* doubles its own generic form, appropriating a staple Mexican narco-drama plotline about the erosion of state institutions in the face of powerful drug cartels. McCoy's concern over Rubirosa's dangerous Mexicanness has manifested in an unexpected way, for in acting on behalf of the state, her duplicitous manipulation of her Mexican ethnicity to compel Raphael's testimony sets the stage for the murder of state agents and government witnesses. "Mexican" emerges here as a volatile, destabilizing signifier as *Law & Order* establishes its transnational form through citation of narco-narratives from south of the border.

Regular viewers of "Boy Gone Astray," now turned on to *narcocorrido* mp3s and their generic conventions, might have felt a jolt of *Law & Order* déjà vu. On January 12, 2005, "Ain't No Love" (Season 15, Episode 13) introduced viewers to the underground market in hip-hop mixtape CDs and the discursive production of "street cred" in gangster rap. Moreover, just as "Boy Gone Astray"'s Raphael would find himself poised between the violent world of his Mexican past and the opportunities his parents sought in the US, four years earlier Shawn Foreman seemed to be fulfilling the dreams of his middle-class Queens parents until old ties to the "street," embodied by his friend "Psycho," threaten to derail his upwardly mobile trajectory. Shawn had just recorded a hip-hop album with the legendary rap producer RC Flex, who was found murdered in his studio at the beginning of the episode, a plotline "ripped from the headlines" concerning the 2002 murder of Run DMC's Jam Master Jay. Police investigation reveals that RC Flex and Shawn had argued shortly before the shooting, apparently about the

mixtape version of the album Shawn and Psycho planned to leak to the street, the proceeds of which would fund Psycho's big buy-in to the drug trade. Just as 2009's *narcocorrido* mp3s would encode messages of gangland murder, so too do these 2005 underground, bootleg raps. Listening to the mixtape, Detectives Green and Fontana (Jesse L. Martin and Dennis Farina) hear Shawn boasting about the murder of a rival drug dealer that involved the same signature "ghetto silencer" (a plastic Orange Delecta bottle) as that used in RC Flex's murder. While it becomes clear that Psycho committed both murders, the police and the DA's office knowingly ignore the genre conventions of gangster rap and collapse the narration of crime with the confession of crime in order to prosecute Shawn.

This willy-nilly substitution of one African American defendant for another agitates ADA Serena Southerlyn (Elisabeth Rohm), who insists that the two individuals should not be substitutable. In the final scene of the episode, District Attorney Arthur Branch (Fred Thompson) lectures ADA Southerlyn on the law before firing her:

ARTHUR BRANCH. You know, Serena, if you were right, you were right for the wrong reasons.

SERENA SOUTHERLYN. Meaning?

ARTHUR BRANCH. Emotions, not facts. What was it you said, everyone you talked to said he couldn't have killed that man?

SERENA SOUTHERLYN. My emotional responses make me . . .

ARTHUR BRANCH. . . . an advocate. You're a superb attorney; you ought to be involved in cases that feed your passion.

SERENA SOUTHERLYN. Well, that would be wonderful.

ARTHUR BRANCH. Serena, you must know, that will not happen in this office. It can't.

Now, a prosecutor can be zealous, but not passionate. Advocacy is warm-blooded, enforcement's got to be cold-blooded, and blind, and even angry.

Delivered with sangfroid, this defense of the district attorney's office touts prosecutorial "blindness" in the face of its double, the emotional responses of advocacy. With the near-conviction of yet another innocent African American, *Law & Order* offers access to the racialized costs of such blindness.

The Latin remix of this episode less than five years later provocatively disabuses regular *Law & Order* viewers of their would-be blindness: The way in which *African American* and *gangster rap* could be so easily "updated" to *Mexican migrant* and *narcocorrido* points to something beyond the show's constitutive pop-ethnographic mode and its formulaic procedural structure. These substitutions, which so bothered ADA Southerlyn, highlight the fungibility of racial signifiers in hegemonic discourses of narcotics and popular music, easily conflating unique racial formations and their geopolitical and sociocultural contexts. In negotiating its relationship to these transnational discourses and genres, *Law & Order* presents, at arm's length, the double criminalization of gangster rap and *narcocorridos*: not only do they narrate, motivate, and confess drug crimes, but their modes of dissemination (mp3s and bootleg CDs) bypass legitimate, copyrighted channels. Commodified scripts of popular music exploit this air of illegality to enhance their appeal. Shawn says of the lyrics that were taken as evidence: "I just put [them] in my song to juice up my rep." And critic Miguel Cabañas notes in a comment relevant to gangster rap as well: "One could not explain the popularity of the *narcocorrido* without the censure of the genre that goes hand in hand with the criminalization of drugs" (520, my translation). Appropriating this double-bind, these *Law & Order* episodes stage the blindness



of law-enforcement scripts while borrowing the illicit allure of the *narcocorrido* and gangster rap genres for its own commercial success.

Through the duality of gangster rap and *narcocorridos*, native informants and prosecutorial blindness, *Law & Order* cites its way into the collapsible space between the truth-claims of official discourse and the conventions of fiction, the aporia that, this essay argues, is at the center of narco-narratives' transnational form. The show's "ripped from the headlines" format intensifies the traffic between official discourses and their fictional doppelgängers. An epigraph precedes *Law & Order* episodes that hew particularly close to the headlines: "Although inspired in part by a true incident, the following story is fictional and does not depict any actual person or event." Not only a legal disclaimer against lawsuits, this disclaimer announces the creative license that enables fiction to probe the discursive construction of reality. In a discussion of Mexican literary production "amidst the din of gunfire," Gabriela Polit-Dueñas notes the crucial importance of fiction in a context where "corrupt official discourses which try to reduce [narcotrafficking] to a legal problem are part of the complexity of the phenomenon" (560). Through techniques of narrative doubling, *Law & Order* draws attention to the way that the abstractions of legal discourse produce and maintain a blindness toward processes of racialization. By self-reflexively participating in the same substitutions as those legal scripts that criminalize racialized subjectivities and cultural production, *Law & Order* delicately positions itself between these scripts and their blind spots.

Negotiating its own delicate position between official discourses of drug violence in the circum-Caribbean, and the melodramatic conventions of the Latin American *telenovela*, the Colombian serial *El cartel* intertextually cites *Law & Order* at the beginning of every one of its fifty-plus episodes. Like *Law & Order*, episodes of *El cartel* open with white text on a black

background accompanied by a resonant voice-over. On *El cartel* it reads: “This is a work of fiction inspired by the book ‘The Cartel of Snitches.’ The characters and situations it presents are equally fictitious.”<sup>1</sup> The “equally” in this disclaimer signifies ambiguously: it may indicate that the characters are as fictitious as the situations, or that the *telenovela* itself is as fictitious as the book. Tellingly, the book *El cartel de los sapos*, written by former narcotrafficker, DEA-collaborator, *El cartel* co-screenwriter, and current Miami jetsetter Andrés López López (Rincón 161), earned its notoriety and best-seller status precisely through its claims to be a true secret history. In announcing that it is as fictitious as the book, the *telenovela* either announces that it is not fictitious at all or it points to the slipperiness of truth claims—and the need for the interpretive protocols brought to bear on and through fiction—in a transnational mediascape of secret histories and official accounts, violence and corruption, snitches and TV shows.

*El cartel* sets its action to the sounds of Colombian *cumbia*, Puerto Rican *reggaetón*, Jamaican dancehall, US gangster rap, and Mexican *narcocorridos*, a complex matrix of circum-Caribbean dance music that performs at the level of sound what *El cartel* does at the level of narrative: operating across mediatized pathways worn smooth by the transit of slaves, merchants, migrants, commodities, capital, and arms, it is a matrix of borrowing, remixing, and collaboration that conspires to wrong-foot those who criticize it for its violence and obscenity. Like the foregoing musical genres, narco-themed *telenovelas* have been surrounded by controversy for sensationalizing, sexualizing, and profiting off the violence that has wreaked such transformational havoc in Colombia, as elsewhere. A popular serial form airing first in 2008 on Caracol TV in Colombia, then picked up for international distribution by Telemundo, *El cartel* negotiates its own precarious ethical status in this context through the protagonist Fresa (Manolo Cardona) and his doppelgänger Cabo (Robinson Díaz). This narrative doubling fuels

the melodramatic morality play of *El cartel*, simultaneously attempting to humanize Fresa, a nickname that roughly translates to Preppy, without making the show vulnerable to claims that it whitewashes the tragedies unleashed by the drug trade and the ensuing efforts to suppress it. With these two characters, *El cartel* stages Colombia's national debate over class relations and political economy in the narco-era, probing the degree to which drug trafficking disrupts the nation's neoliberal values or aligns with them. However, this narrative doubling around the fulcrum of social class gets radically decentered as the show insists upon the transnational structure of the narco-economy, with Miami--the destination for the majority of drug cargo as well as the site of DEA headquarters--emerging as an alternative, circum-Caribbean supra-national capital. This cartographic doubling of political and economic power mitigates *El cartel*'s national discourse and forces viewers to reassess ethical questions under transnational structures of dominance.

*El cartel* juggles the protagonist and his counterpart, as it does discourses of fiction and truth. In this way it manages to "produce an image of illegality," as O. Hugo Benavides argues about Latin American narco-dramas, "in a much more ambiguous and nuanced form than that imposed by official discourse ... even [while] still heavily embedded in the political and cultural constraints of the melodramatic medium" (17, 9). The first episode of the series opens with Fresa in handcuffs being escorted out of Miami International Airport and motorcaded to a federal detention center where he is stripped and searched. As he puts on his orange jumpsuit, his voiceover narration begins: "Everything I am about to tell you you can think is a lie, and, well, it's within your right to think what you want but what I'm about to recount (*contar*) is the truth, it's my truth, it's my version of what happened." The opening lines of the show foreground the narrative mode of confession, which serves multiple ends in *El cartel*. Fresa's pleading tone hints

at a desire for atonement and redemption. However, as the scene cuts to Fresa in well-tailored black street clothes, sitting on a chair in front of a small digital video camera, in a dark room surrounded by purplish fluorescent lights and two armed guards, we wonder what other ends his confession may serve, what deals he may have cut. Given the origins of the show in the commodification of Andrés López López's confession, *El cartel*'s Scheherezadian narrative frame foreshadows the conflicts and interests motivating characters to offer their stories, their "version[s] of what happened," accessing the citational and multi-positional construction that, I argue, is inherent to the narco-narrative genre.

In his career as a *narco*, Fresa tries to stay aloof from violence and to treat his vocation as a straightforward pursuit of professional gratification and financial security; cartel boss Don Oscar even remarks upon how much Fresa revels in "moving merchandise (*merca*).” Yet pressures from within both the cartel and his family evacuate this neutral mercantilist middle ground. When she finally figures out that he is a *narco*, his grandmother kicks him out of the house, saying: "You have to reflect on the life you are pursuing. This path will only lead you to disgrace." With Fresa cut off from his family, the cartel increasingly becomes a surrogate family. When Fresa refuses to carry a gun, Don Oscar's partner Don Julio instructs him: "When you have reached the position you're in, you don't do the things that you like but the things you have to." Fresa demurs once more, and Don Julio tells him to get out of the business: "You weren't born for this," and his wife adds, "Stop being naïve." At this moment, Don Julio's body guards rush up to tell him that the police have penetrated the perimeter of the ranch (*finca*) and that they have to flee. Don Julio says he's tired of running, and the scene cuts to an *Ultima Hora* newsflash announcing his arrest, followed by a scene of Don Julio in a dank jail cell impotently vowing revenge against his captors. We then cut once more to Fresa, seen in the flip-out screen

of the small digital video camera. The visual sequence of “documentary” frames documents that his initial years in the cartel gave him ample warning that he should get out. “In those five years, I travelled the road I’d dreamed so much about,” he reflects. “Glory. But I wanted more and more and more.”

In the unfolding of *El cartel*, Cabo emerges as a literal and symbolic obstacle to Fresa’s efforts to remain nonviolent, to retire from the business, and to reenter legitimate society. Cabo’s arc underscores the dark underbelly of Fresa’s desire for “more and more and more,” linking the pleasures Fresa takes in commodity trafficking to the violence that inescapably accompanies it. Cabo initially serves as Don Oscar’s campy, ultraviolent *gatillero* (trigger-man), with a handlebar moustache, exaggerated snarl, and nasally *montaño* (hillbilly) drawl. When Don Oscar sends Fresa to Miami to lay low, Cabo encourages an intensification of violence against rival cartels, enforcing a bloodthirsty code of honor that gauges status through markers of dominance rather than profit. To punish Fresa’s disengagement from the cartel and his intervention in saving the life of a contracted target, Cabo collaborates with the DEA in attempting to set him up, marking Cabo’s increasing obsession with Fresa and with the latter’s privileged position in Miami.

The structural relationship between Fresa and Cabo uses the device of narrative doubling to stage (but ultimately to interrogate) what Colombian cultural critic Omar Rincón refers to as “Narco.lombia”’s national allegory in the neoliberal era, which ostensibly allocates responsibilities for acts of violence in such a way as to keep the elites’ hands clean, to absolve them of responsibility for the narco-economy and its attendant bloodshed. This structural relationship echoes its US variant as mediated by *Law & Order*: hegemonic scripts of drug violence shunt responsibility onto fungible racialized and spatialized signifiers, rather than

examining the role of official discourse and policy, not to mention white middle-class demand for narcotics, in producing and sustaining that violence. In the Colombian case, whereas Fresa represents an upwardly mobile, urban petite bourgeoisie pursuing neoliberal values, Cabo represents a resentful working class consigned to the position of *gatillero*. The show treats Fresa as a rational economic actor “who has been attracted to the rapidly-expanding, multi-billion dollar drug economy,” as Phillipe Bourgois has argued about crack dealers, rather than as an “‘exotic other’ operating in an irrational netherworld” (Bourgois 326). Fresa sympathetically embodies capitalist ideology yet comes to recognize the inseparability of this ideology *in the narco-economy* from Cabo’s violent, power-obsessed “irrational netherworld.” The show ambivalently makes this inseparability applicable to neoliberal capitalism in general through Cabo’s own upward mobility. After Don Oscar dies, Cabo begins dealing (*traqueteando*) and acquires the trappings of a *jefe*: a large *finca* and Don Julio’s ex-wife. This class jump provokes snide remarks from the traditional class of dons, but also trepidation. Tapping into a central trope of Colombian narco-narrative, the show dramatizes national anxieties over the cocaine-fuelled destabilization of traditional class hierarchies, an anxiety also at work in that circum-Caribbean narco-Ur-text, *Scarface* (1983), where ultra-violent Mariel refugee Tony Montana (Al Pacino) usurps the dominant underworld position of post-1959, bourgeois Cuban exile Frank Lopez (Robert Loggia).<sup>2</sup> By raising the abominable specter of Cabo taking over the cartel, the *telenovela* may inspire viewers to long for precisely the traditional class hierarchy that Cabo contests, or it could lay bare for them the systemic unity of trade and violence undergirding that class hierarchy. This ambiguity acquires another layer of complexity when we take into account that the Colombian players operate in a world not of their own making. From generals in the Colombian army carrying out orders from civilian politicians under pressure from the US

government as part of the Plan Colombia aid package, to cartel leaders taking advantage of new deals being offered by the DEA, the Colombian players in this narco-drama must navigate the whims of both US drug policy and US consumer demand. *El cartel*'s portrait of the narco-economy relies on our seduction by Fresa and, through this focalization, offers the experience of incremental dread as he finds himself increasingly haunted by his lower-class double Cabo. Yet the long shadow of US economics--funding both the war on drugs and the traffic in drugs--renders these characters, and Colombia more generally, as structured in dominance. The class-based critique of the narco-economy, which may or may not translate into a larger critique of neoliberal capitalism *tout court*, finds something for all Colombians to agree on by recognizing that it is the United States who has established the conditions for this ambiguity.

As in Colombia, the cocaine trade has also fueled transformational violence in Jamaica, dovetailing with a similar US-sponsored neoliberal transition at the beginning of the 1980s. By reworking Ernie Smith's 1974 popular reggae number "Duppy Gun Man" through doubling its temporal and cartographic orientations, Yellowman's 1982 song "Duppy or Gunman" uses the citational practices of dancehall to chart a ghostly history of this transformational violence that is anchored in a critique of hemispheric political economy. Specifically, "Duppy or Gunman" responds to the overwhelming bloodshed leading up to and persisting after the 1980 elections in Jamaica. Caught up in US Cold War proxy politics, more than eight hundred people were killed as the CIA-backed Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) took power from the left-wing People's National Party (PNP). The electoral conflict solidified a map of Kingston crisscrossed by heavily armed, politically affiliated garrison communities partly funded through CIA-encouraged cocaine transshipment (Edmonds). A sequence of repetitions mediates between Yellowman's aestheticization of local gunfire and a spiritual, cartographical critique of this hemispheric

violence. The 1982 track “Duppy or Gunman” opens with Yellowman covering Smith’s 1974 hit “Duppy Gun Man” over “Junjo” Lawes’s 1980 “Gunman” rhythm track. Reconstructing the original rhythm track of “Duppy Gun Man” with a dub-infused, ghostly sound, Lawes’s “Gunman” renders the duppy of the original title even more spectral. Smith’s 1974 song reflects a moment just before the horrific violence unleashed in 1980, recounting a semi-humorous parable about a would-be Romeo frightened off when “a dread from ‘cross de Gully / just passin’ through / decide fe run little joke” and shout “don’t move.” Overreacting to the dreadlocked passerby from a potentially antagonistic neighborhood, the protagonist of the 1974 “Duppy Gun Man” fails to “keep his head” and assumes the dread to be either a ghost or a gunman. This either/or registers the violence that haunts 1974 Kingston’s past and threatens its future; Yellowman’s 1982 version marks such violence as the inescapable condition of the present:

Must be a duppy or a gunman

I man no find out yet

I and I was so frightened

All the M-16 I forget.

While Smith was so frightened that he forgot the name of the girl he was with, so frightened was Yellowman that he even forgot the M-16s around him. With American-made weapons having flooded Jamaica in the lead-up to the 1980 election, “Duppy or Gunman” marks the pervasive violence that continued to plague society in its aftermath, as “party leaders,” in Laurie Gunst’s account, “menaced by an outlaw underworld they could no longer control, turned the Jamaican police loose in the ghettos to execute their former paladins” (xv). Nadi Edwards comments on the reggae/dancehall rendering of Kingston’s violence: “It is a nightmare world, haunting and



haunted, a world in which gunmen turn their victims into duppies, but the killers themselves are ghosts, spectral bodies that materialize only as agents of violence” (12).

The dialogic reggae/dancehall aesthetics of versioning and dub production moves this haunting in two temporal directions: Yellowman’s “Duppy or Gunman” is melancholically haunted by the lightheartedness of Smith’s original, while it simultaneously haunts Smith’s song with the “nightmare world” of what was to come. Yellowman turns the ubiquitous gunfire of the present to aesthetic ends:

The simplest thing is blam-blam-blam,  
 The simplest thing is blam-blam-blam,  
 Say what is this on our lickle island?  
 Say cool down yourself youth man.  
 The gun go boom-ka-ka-kye-kye-kye,  
 The Magnum boom-ka-ka-kye-kye-kye,  
 The cannon go woom, the cannon go woom.

Yellowman’s onomatopoeics of violence rhyme over a tinkly, echoed-out keyboard line and a sampled human yelp. He aestheticizes the sonic material of gunfire, and he also, once again, names and thereby sources it. Gunfire from American-made M-16s and Magnums appear as alien, foreign objects: “Say what is this on our likkle island?” Yellowman asks with dismay.

“Duppy or Gunman” thereby changes the scale of the cartography of violence tracked in the song, zooming out in order to set local violence within a US-dominated transnational frame. The song suggests that its litany of violent crimes, from shoot-ups in dancehalls to robberies in Spanish Town, is a local expression of an invasive geopolitics, ironically affirming the title of another song on the album *Mister Yellowman* (1982), “Jamaica a Little Miami.” This

cartographic layering of scales emerges early in “Duppy or Gunman,” when Yellowman switches from singing Smith’s lyrics to deejaying. His descending flow, in conjunction with the identical guitar figures at the beginning of the bars in both songs, establishes a telling connection with Michigan and Smiley’s 1981 smash dancehall hit “Diseases,” as he rhymes:

Gunshot it no respect no one

Gunshot it no respect no one

It kill soldier man, it kill policeman

It kill bad man, also gun man

It kill animal, also human

“Duppy or Gunman” calls out to Michigan and Smiley’s musically embodied trope of contagion to narrate the escalation of violence as an infectious transnational disease carried across borders by “M-16s” and “Magnums.” Yet whereas the Biblical righteousness of Michigan and Smiley’s “Diseases” warns of God’s vengeance against loose women, Yellowman revises the traditional Christian prayer “For Health and Strength” in order to invoke Rastafarian faith talismanically for protection against the disease of transnational violence: “For health and strength and daily food / we praise thy name oh Jah.” Through this citational layering of generic doubles, “Duppy or Gunman” articulates itself as a local critique, a prayer in the face of a geopolitical cartography shaped by US-manufactured weapons, drug trafficking to feed US demand, structural poverty, and Cold War political interference.

Also attending to US-Caribbean Cold War relations, Russell Banks’s 1995 novel *Rule of the Bone* processes a geopolitical cartography of violence through the subject position of the white US consumer of both drugs and Jamaican culture. Banks’s *Bildungsroman* appropriates a classic narrative structure of US fiction, the white hero and his non-white sidekick,<sup>3</sup> in order to

lay bare the circum-Caribbean racialization of both drug violence and narrative violence. *Rule of the Bone* conjures a narrative space of doubles and repetitions to foreground its own participation in these racialized discourses, to insist upon the necessary incompleteness of any one narrative site of redress, and to direct readers to its intertextual doubles within the transnational field of narco-narrative production.

*Rule of the Bone*'s doubling intertextuality stages and historicizes the narrative workings of white privilege via a white American adolescent's tutelage by a Rastafarian elder. The iconic nineteenth-century friendship between Huck and Jim gets reworked through the late twentieth-century characters Bone and I-Man, the latter an undocumented Jamaican migrant laborer while in the US, though in Jamaica he is part of a Rastafarian group that supplies white American drug traffickers with marijuana. Bone, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, was sexually abused by his stepfather as a seven-year-old and now sports a mohawk and piercings, has dropped out of high school, and sells a bit of pot in order to pay rent with his friend and a scary bunch of bikers in Upstate New York. He eventually meets I-Man and learns about the production of his undocumented status:

The deal was [he was] supposed to work on the apple trees in the spring and then in June the same crew was supposed to go to Florida on a bus and cut sugarcane all summer for a different company and come back north in the fall and pick apples. Once you signed on you couldn't quit until six months were up without losing all the money that you'd earned so far and your work permit so if you left the camp you were like an international outlaw, an illegal alien plus you were broke. (155-156)

While this passage, especially with its reference to sugarcane, registers the historically resonant state of bondage in which Jamaican migrant laborers circulate in the US, Bone's use of the

phrase “international outlaw” nonetheless attaches a sense of dangerous romance to I-Man as well. As Jim O’Loughlin notes, *Rule of the Bone* “explicitly interrogates” this romance as intertextually linked to “the white privilege inherent in fantasies of escaping from society in *Huckleberry Finn*” (31). In spite of Bone’s working-class, victimized social status, his development (*Bildung*) through friendship with I-Man prompts him to examine the privileges, complexities, and limitations of his role as white observer and narrator of this particular Black experience. As O’Loughlin comments: “Bone is forced to acknowledge his participation in a racialized system. In fact, his growth as a character becomes dependent upon that recognition” (40).

This racialized system is as literary and linguistic as it is economic. In another scene of intertextual doubling, Bone watches I-Man garden with Rose, a wan blonde six-year-old girl whose crack-addicted mother sold her to a sketchy character named Buster Brown. Bone devised her escape from Buster and took refuge in an abandoned school bus that I-Man, no longer on the migrant labor route, had converted into a trailer home. Observing them, Bone thinks:

They made a real nice picture, the two of them and it made me think of that book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which I got from the library and read in seventh grade for a book report but my teacher was wicked pissed at me for saying it was pretty good considering a white woman wrote it and gave me a D. My teacher was a white woman herself and thought I was being disrespectful but I wasn’t. I just knew it would’ve been different if it’d been written by a black man, say, or even a black woman and it would’ve been better too because the old guy Uncle Tom would’ve kicked some serious ass and then he’d’ve probably been lynched or something but it almost would’ve been worth it. In those old

slavery days white people were *really* fucked up was what I meant in my book report and the white lady who wrote it was trying not to be, that's all. (161)

This invocation of Little Eva and Uncle Tom racializes authorship and emphasizes how *Rule of the Bone* self-reflexively limns the risks of its intertextual filiation with dubious literary ancestors. Just as I-Man, as a Rastafarian spiritual elder to Bone, echoes Uncle Tom's relationship to George Shelby, his owner's son, the reader is asked to attend to Banks's relationship with Harriet Beecher Stowe. The novel acknowledges its inextricability, inside and outside the book's cover, from the shadow of those melodramatic characters.

The confessional mode connects the racialization of authorship and the weight of these iconic figures to the present moment. Recalling Fresca's opening claims to offer "the truth, my truth, my version of what happened" in *El cartel*, Bone opens the *Rule of the Bone* saying: "You'll probably think I'm making a lot of this up just to make me sound better than I really am or smarter or even luckier but I'm not. ... The fact is the truth is more interesting than anything I could make up and that's why I'm telling it in the first place" (1). This confession asserts Bone's commitment to truth and "interesting"-ness, while recognizing that this story may provoke readers to consider Bone to be bragging about his international adventures with a charismatic Rastafarian elder. Disavowing any interest in self-promotion, this preface preemptively addresses the way the accumulation of racialized echoes and models might inflect the reader's sense of what motivates Bone to share his story.

After accumulating nineteenth-century echoes overshadowed by the violence of slavery, Banks's novel pointedly sets the violence of the present within a geopolitics of the Cold War that Bone has now been properly formed to read and recite. Having relocated from Upstate New

York to Jamaica's Cockpit Country, host to the Maroon polity Accompong, Bone has joined I-Man's brethren working their marijuana fields:

After we had the dirt ready we planted the seeds for the new crop and hauled water and got the rows real soppy and for shading them while the plants were still babies we ran strings from poles and hung these humongous thin camouflage sheets that I-Man said'd been left behind in Grenada after the United States Army finished invading and went home. Dem hiding sheets spread all over de Caribbean now, mon. Dem de bes' t'ing 'bout dat invasion so as t' mek de ganja reach him fulfillment undisturbed 'neath de Jamaica sun an' den return to Babylon an' help create de peaceable kingdom dere. Jah mek de instruments of destruction come forward fe be instruments of *instruction*. (330)

Bone's first-person narration subtly integrates I-Man's Rastafarian dialect through an unmarked, free indirect discourse, suggesting Bone's own habitation of this nation-language. Whereas Yellowman prays for his own salvation amidst cocaine-fuelled, Cold War garrison politics, I-Man's Rastafarian dialectic optimistically reflects on marijuana traffic to the US as a project of spiritual enlightenment that will turn America away from proxy wars and foreign intervention. Yet a racialized and spatialized double-vision marks both "Duppy or Gunman" and *The Rule of the Bone*: I-Man's cold-blooded assassination at the hands of his white American distributors underscores the persistent and casual destruction rained down upon expendable Black lives caught up in feeding US drug demand, precisely that "proximity and vulnerability to imperial and neoimperial forces" that, Stites Mor notes, informs the circum-Caribbean's critical vantage point on the possibilities of "transnational solidarity" (279).

Disclosing the expendability of Black life in the eyes of many Jamaicans and Americans alike, one of the assassins says to his partner, "We shouldn't do a white kid... The tourist

board'll go nuts" (339). At this point in the novel, Bone not only has grown comfortable speaking a Rasta-inflected patois, but he has been initiated by I-Man and his brethren into a ganja-assisted process of "coming to know I-self" (329). His *Bildung* fulfilled, Bone can confront his white privilege head-on, recognizing that "it was my white skin that'd saved me from being blown away like Prince Shabba and I-Man" (342). At the end of the novel, Bone sits docked in Montego Bay, about to depart Jamaica, left to reflect on what Achille Mbembe calls the "racist distribution of death" in the hemispheric "economy of biopower" (17), as well as on the racist distribution of death in the narrative economy of drug violence that his own story participates in. While Bone preserves I-Man's language and spirit, the death of violence-averse I-Man confirms the novel's participation in that racialized narrative economy. Which of course begs the question: on the book's own terms, then, must we conclude that *Rule of the Bone*, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is "pretty good considering a white [man] wrote it"?

Maybe Russell Banks himself does not tell the story of "the old guy kick[ing] some serious ass and then ... probably [getting] lynched or something but it almost would've been worth it," because the novel signals that that story has already been told, and that, for all his linguistic dexterity, it still wasn't Banks's to tell. Recurrent intertextual cues prompt readers of *Rule of the Bone* to seek out the outlaw rude-boy epic *The Harder They Come*--the novel's transnational narrative double--to fill this narrative space that the novel conjures but necessarily leaves empty. Bone and I-Man's crossing from the US to Jamaica is scored by the epoch-defining soundtrack of the 1972 film in which reggae star Jimmy Cliff plays outlaw folk-hero Ivanhoe "Rhygin" Martin (237). "A male subaltern exemplar of early postcolonial resistance" (Bogues 22), Ivan quixotically challenges the position he has been allotted in the global narco-economy. Upon seeing on television that a planeload of Jamaican ganja seized in Miami was

valued at \$100,000, he recognizes that the money involved far exceeds the meager take he risks his life for as a street dealer, and furthermore that the state itself is one of the major players in a semi-official international commodity trade. With fearless grace and with guns blazing, he takes on the police and military over the course of a manhunt that captured the Jamaican public's imagination in the film and in history. Ivan's grace itself represents the rude-boy, outlaw anti-hero's performative resignification of the heroic, colonialist Hollywood westerns Jamaican audiences both laugh at and learn from at the beginning of the film. *The Harder They Come* concludes with a wounded Ivan on the beach at Lime Cay, waiting for a boat that will carry him to his "big welcome" in a Cuba that in 1972 Jamaica embodied the liberatory aspirations channeled by Michael Manley's ruling People's National Party. As a military unit surrounds him, Ivan joyously rises from behind the bushes and meets his death, fulfilling the transcendent performative destiny integral to the rude-boy genre, as well as its offspring in the dancehall, such as Vybz Kartel's gun song "Send a Hell" (2008); in literature, as reworked in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*; and in Jamaican nation-language itself, where as Bogue notes, "death is 'tek life,' a spectacle that affirms [the] life [of young men who participate in violence] in the absence of positive alternatives" (24).<sup>4</sup>

While preserving its distribution of death, *The Harder They Come* completes *Rule of the Bone* by offering an alternative aesthetic of violence to that of the pitiable, long-suffering death of Uncle Tom, and, in the figure of I-Man, that of the rote, routinized death of yet another white protagonist's sidekick. Banks's novel suggests that this was aesthetic work his book could not, should not do, at least not alone. With Bone poised to depart Jamaica by sea, the novel concludes with his privilege of navigating away from the scene of violence. Like his doubles Huck Finn, ready to light out for the territories; Shawn Foreman, living off his rap royalties; and Fresa,



poised to retire in Miami, he occupies a narrative space not permitted to his subaltern, raced and classed double. The citational texts of circum-Caribbean drug violence register this privilege while calling upon multiple narrative sites, cartographic scales, and generic modes to do justice to those left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> “Esta es una obra de ficción inspirada en el libro ‘El Cartel de los Sapos.’ Los personajes y situaciones que se presentan son igualmente ficticios.”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Vallejo and Restrepo.

<sup>3</sup> See Lawrence, chs. 4, 5, and 11; and Fiedler.

<sup>4</sup> In “Send a Hell,” Kartel deejays:

Miller 9 clap, clap it mek di cops see  
 Somebody haffi dead an yuh threaten me, fi box mi  
 Two inna dem face coof coof I'm get drop see  
 Dem ah go rush I'm go doctor but I'm dead inna di taxi. (2008)

Alternative to this classical expression of rude-boy “tek-life,” in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Marlon James ambivalently fashions for Josey Wales, based on the real-life figure Lester “Jim Brown” Coke, a different sort of death-embracing “heroism” as he is consumed by a prison-house fire at the behest of the CIA and Jamaican government. Mastermind of his own success, Wales sabotages the 1978 Downtown Kingston Peace Treaty and the prospect of a Rasta Revolution, thereby buying himself total immunity from both the CIA and the JLP-government of Edward Seaga, which allows him to manage safely for more than a decade a drug trafficking network that stretches from Colombia, through the Caribbean, and across the United States. The reader’s admiration for his diabolical effectiveness, his ability to see the geopolitical balance of power better than condescending Americans and Uptown Jamaicans, presses hard against his responsibility for the shooting of Bob Marley and the undermining of the peace treaty, the hopes for which, the actual possibility for which, are best expressed in the novel by Tristan Phillips, based on the real-life Trevor Phillips:

People need to know. They need to know I guess that, that there was this one time when we coul’a do it, you know? We coul’a really do it. People was just hopeful enough and tired enough and fed up enough and dreaming enough that something coul’a really happen. ... Even people who usually expect the worst did, if only for two or three month, start to think peace a little then a lot, then peace was all they could think about. Is like how before rain reach you can taste it coming in the breeze. (James 568-9)

Yet Tristan/Trevor was part of the leadership within the Downtown underworld that, according to Josey Wales, speaking about Papa-Lo (real-life Claude Massop), his mentor and double from the previous generation, “Start to act like he no longer like the world he himself help create. ... He the worst kind of fool, the fool who start believing things can get better. ... He not getting soft, he thinking deep, which politicians don’t pay him to do. ... He want to forget them. I want to use them” (James 42-3).

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